The Criterion of "Relevance" in the Support of Research in the Social Sciences: 1965–1985

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MOST MODERN democratic governments continue to appropriate considerable sums of money for social science research. In so doing they make distinctions between basic and applied research and often express this distinction in the types of institutions which allocate research funds. In the United States the organisation with the prime responsibility for supporting basic research is called the National Science Foundation; in the United Kingdom it is called a research council. Their support of basic research is directed mainly to the universities and is guided through a system of peer review according to the criterion of what holds most promise for increasing scientific knowledge.

Despite the continued existence of such separate bodies for supporting basic science, it is a common experience that such organisations have been under pressure from their governments to prove themselves "useful"—or in the official language—"relevant to national needs". Most often such needs are defined in terms of improving the competitive performance of the national economy but other contributions such as improving health may also be regarded as relevant. The direction of research funds towards relevance is associated with such terms as "mission oriented research", "solicited grants projects", "research initiatives", "demonstration grants", "action research", "customer defined priorities", "special set asides" and "problem solving". Distinctions are also made between short- and long-term applications, between strategic and applied, and between specific and contextual research. Certain disciplines, such as education, are thought to be applied, and certain fields, such as management studies, are defined in terms of application. Whether it is applied or basic, multidisciplinary research is thought to be especially desirable.

No matter what label or category is attached to research, the content of what is deemed "relevant" changes over time with shifting political currents, alterations in the understanding of science, and revisions in the urgency of what are called "national needs". Furthermore, whatever the intent of the investigator or the imprint of the supporting agency, much of social science research being undertaken in the normal course of academic work in universities is bound, either directly or indirectly, to have some relevance to issues of policy. For example, inquiries by economists as to how the economy functions inevitably concern the way the actions of different governments affect the economy. When economists apply for funds to advance their academic work, this usually entails either models about or the collection of data about the real world. And concerns about the "real world" mount constant pressures on supporting agencies to fund research that gives some prospect of being relevant to the problems of that world.

There is, however, a significant change in the situation when someone other than social scientists begin to define which problems should be studied and offers resources to encourage a shift of interest. We are then in a situation where a supporting agency is constrained to intensify its efforts to "manage relevance". A further problem arises when the task is not clearly defined by a "customer" such as another government department (which has a clear responsibility for applying policy), but by an agency assigned to the support of science, the responsibility of which is to advance scientific knowledge.[1]

In the period from 1965 to 1985, the National Science Foundation in the United States and the research councils in the United Kingdom made distinctive efforts to encourage research to be "relevant". There is a striking difference between their experience in responding to demands that they support relevant research; the effort to be useful went further in the United Kingdom and continued longer. How are these differences to be accounted for?

It is not possible simply to compare the support for social research in the two countries, because the two major institutions, the Social Science—later the Economic and Social—Research Council in Great Britain and the National Science Foundation in the United States, do not dispose over all the funds available for research in the social science in their respective countries.

Social Science in the National Science Foundation

The National Science Foundation, established in 1950 as an independent agency in the executive branch of government, is unique among American federal agencies in its statutory responsibility for strengthening all fields of science. Its stated aim is "to promote and advance scientific progress in the United States".[2] It fulfils this mandate primarily by supporting research projects at colleges and universities throughout the country.[3] Its director and the 24 members of its governing body, the National Science Board, are appointed for six-year terms by the President with the advice and consent of the United States Senate.

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[1] See, e.g. Cherns, A. B., Sinclair, R. and Jenkins, W. I. (eds), *Social Science and Government* (London: Tavistock, 1972); Bulmer, Martin (ed.), *Social Science Research and Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Horowitz, Irving Louis (ed.), *The Use and Abuse of Social Science*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1975); and Klausner, S. Z. and Lindz, V. M. (eds), *The Nationalization of the Social Sciences* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

[2] "About the National Science Foundation", *National Science Foundation Annual Report, 1988* (Washington, DC: NSF, 1989), p. I.

[3] The NSF receives more than 37,500 proposals each year and makes more than 16,000 awards. *Ibid.*

Since the mid-1950s the total budget of the National Science Foundation has increased more than a hundredfold to reach $1,826 million in 1989.[4] Through several administrations, and particularly during the Reagan era, it has been one of the favoured federal agencies in that it experienced fairly steady budgetary growth. That, however, has not been the case for the social sciences within the foundation. The fraction allocated to the social sciences rose from a mere 1 per cent in 1957 to a high point of 7.4 per cent in 1962, and then declined to 3.1 per cent in 1975 and still further to 2.2 per cent in 1985 whilst wavering around 3 per cent since then.[5] By 1986, then National Science Foundation accounted for 6.3 per cent of all federal funding for the social and behavioural sciences; it was nearly twice that proportion (12.5 per cent) in 1975. Moreover, the total federal support for social science, basic and applied, in constant (1972) dollars declined from $358 million in 1975 to $328 million in 1985.

To sum up, support for the social sciences by the National Science Foundation was less important in the national total of support for social sciences in 1985 than it had been a decade earlier, and was less important within the total support for all the sciences in the foundation.

Despite its present favoured status, the National Science Foundation did not emerge without a struggle. It took more than five years of legislative wrangling before the President and the Congress could agree on the terms of reference of the foundation in 1950. One of the issues of contention was whether or not the social sciences should be included. During the debates two distinct views were expressed. One would exclude the social sciences because they were not considered to be sufficiently rigorous intellectually. The other would include them because of their prospective social utility. Neither view prevailed. A compromise was adopted which permitted the National Science Foundation to proceed at its own pace in developing support for the social sciences. It moved slowly. The leadership of the foundation was mindful of congressional suspicion towards projects in the social sciences, and particularly towards the matters about which controversy with political implications might arise. Accordingly, the National Science Foundation found it prudent to defend its enlarging role for social science in terms of its responsibility for basic research; it did not claim much immediate practical relevance for the work it supported. By supporting projects convergent with the interests and philosophy of physical science, social science gradually gained respect inside the foundation. In 1960 a division of social science came into being.

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[4] National Science Foundation, *Federal Funds for Research and Development*, Vol. XXXVII, NSF 89–304 (Washington, DC: NSF, 1989).

[5] But the NSF, while strong as a "defining agent", is not the sole source of federal support for social science. See, Quarles, Susan D. (ed.), *Guide to Federal Funding for Social Scientists* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1986).

By the mid-1960s the grounds for supporting science in general began to shift. "Relevance" became a salient claim for political support. Congress began to ask what science could do for society. The demand was related to the movement for civil rights; the anti-war movement had gathered momentum and the programme of the "great society", under President Johnson, included its "war on poverty".

In 1965 the committee with the primary responsibility for the congressional review of the National Science Foundation proposed legislation—ultimately enacted in 1968—that significantly altered the character of the foundation by broadening its authority to conduct applied as well as basic research. Simultaneously, the social sciences were, for the first time, explicitly included in its terms of reference. The link seemed natural to the supporters of social science in the Congress. It was thought by some politicians in the 1960s that social science included applied disciplines that could contribute to the solution of social problems. Eighteen years after the National Science Foundation was founded, social science, having gained at least the simulacrum of scientific legitimacy was now thought qualified for application in dealing with practical problems.

It was not long before the new legislative authority for applied research was translated into action. The agency, pressed by congressional concerns over social and economic conditions, and tempted by the opportunity to expand its budget, somewhat reluctantly made a major move toward relevance with a programme called Interdisciplinary Research Relevant to the Problems of Society (IRRPOS). The size of this initial programme in 1970 was modest—only $6 million out of the $275 million which were provided by the National Science Foundation for research. The programme was renamed Research Applied to National Needs (RANN).

The door had been opened to programmes which were managed by scientific administrators. New programmes were promulgated by the foundation; it set forth programmes and invited applicants for research which was thought to fit into such programmes. This was in contrast with its earlier practice of avoiding setting any but the widest boundaries within which proposals would be considered. Contracts and "requests for proposals" (RFPs) became common. Conflicts arose between the proponents of the new style brought in by the engineers who managed this programme and those who favoured the conventional academic approach to basic research, which did not solicit proposals, but which considered all that were submitted.

In the United States of the early 1970s, there was preoccupation with overcoming a recession. The Nixon administration had been stressing austerity in government spending, but there was a shift in policy towards stimulating the economy through an increase in federal expenditures. The National Science Foundation shared in this by increasing its expenditure through RANN. The $41.9 million allocated to RANN in 1972 was the largest single increase ever approved for a particular research programme in a single year. Funds were earmarked for work by physical scientists, engineers, etc., for research on social, environmental and economic topics selected by congressional committees and officials of the foundation. The concern for relevance continued in President Nixon's budget request in 1973 which included about $80 million for RANN.[6] In the early stages, the social sciences were a minor part of the programme. However by 1975 the expenditure of RANN on social science began to approach that of the total budget for the division of social sciences at the foundation: $20 million compared with $27 million.

The prosperity of RANN was shortlived. By 1977, the programme was discredited both in terms of its failure to meet "national needs" and in scientific quality. RANN's activities were gradually discontinued or absorbed into the established pattern of the National Science Foundation. Thus the foundation's major multidisciplinary effort to meet the demand for relevance lasted less than a decade, and it only had a substantial amount of money at its disposal for five years.

It did not take the foundation long to regain its earlier focus. It took as its task the persuasion of Congress to the view that basic research is the best road to relevance, because in the long-run it is essential for the production of practical results. Thus the director issued a bulletin describing 26 examples of research supported in the course of three decades by the foundation: "because their valuable applications were *not* anticipated at the time the research began—but their end results are already benefiting the Nation's economy and our daily lives."[7]

Given the tendency of politicians to favour projects with specific immediate benefits, it was not easy to gain their understanding of the benefits of basic research. The battle on behalf of basic research at the National Science Foundation has no end. When it began to dismantle programmes of applied research in the early 1980s, congressional committees expressed concern; this led the foundation to instruct its staff to designate all projects as either "applied" or "basic" research.[8] Presumably such a procedure was intended to assure legislators that "relevance" was a criterion of decision through some commitment to applied research. Nevertheless, it was not long before more than 95 per cent of the projects initiated by investigators and supported by the foundation fell into the category of basic research.

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[6] Gillette, Robert *et al.*, "1973 Budget: Administration Bets on Applied Science", *Science*, LXXV (28 January, 1972), pp. 389–392.

[7] Three social science studies were reported as having produced new understandings bearing on a sign language for the deaf, an economic development policy for East Africa, and the perception of colour brightness affecting specifications for everything from photography and communication systems to highways and visibility on airport runways. Atkinson, Richard C., *The Unanticipated Benefits from Basic Research* (Washington, DC: NSF, February 1980).

[8] Both "basic" and "applied" were defined as involving "systematic study" but with different objectives. The objective of basic research "is to gain fuller understanding of the fundamental aspects without specific applications toward products or processes in mind". The objective of applied research "is to gain knowledge or understanding necessary for determining the means by which a recognized and specific need may be met". *NSF Bulletin 81–33*, and *AAEO Bulletin 83–04*.

The British Experience of Research Councils

The British research council system, of which the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)—which became the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 1982—is a part, had grown bit by bit over a period of nearly 50 years before reaching its present form in 1965.[9] The earliest of the five research councils which make up the system, the Medical Research Council, received its charter in 1920. All five councils report to the Department of Education and Science, the nearest approximation to a ministry of science in Britain, and their budgets form part of the science budget for that department. There is a co-ordinating body, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC), which advises the minister on the distribution of the science budget between the five councils. The advisory board has a scientist as chairman and has three kinds of members: the heads of the five councils; Chief Scientists from government departments; and independents, mostly from industry; some of the latter are scientists.

The science budget increased in cash terms from £296 million in 1978–79 to £620 million in 1986–87 and was planned to increase to £661.7 million in 1987–88. However, given the increasing costs of scientific research, the costs of reorganising the arrangements for certain fields of science, and the discrepancy between salary increases and the sum the government had provided for them, the science budget as a whole probably showed little if any growth between 1979 and 1985. The Economic and Social Research Council received only 3.7 per cent of the total for 1987–88 as against nearly 7 per cent in 1977–78. An estimate made in 1977 of the share of support by the government for social research provided by the SSRC indicated that it was less than one fifth of the total (18.5 per cent). If, however, the funds for the "research element" in the general support of the universities is added, the share of the Social Science Research Council fell to only 10 per cent. Private foundations provided a negligible amount of support—less than 5 per cent—and this is comparable with the situation in the United States in 1980. However, the figure in both countries was substantially higher before the major expansion of government social science funding in the 1960s.[10] Government funding both through the Economic and Social Research Council and direct from government departments has been cut sharply; by the mid-1980s it was about 40 per cent less in real terms than it had been in 1979.

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[9] The SSRC/ESRC has been examined in depth as an organisation in two studies: Lord Rothschild, *Enquiry*, Cmnd 8554 (London: HMSO, 1982); and Lisle, Edmond, Machin, H. and Yasin, S., *Traversing the Crisis* (London: ESRC, 1984).

[10] It is estimated that private foundations generally provide about 5 per cent of the total social science research budget in the United Kingdom. In the United States, foundations provided 16.1 per cent of all social science research funds in 1964. This share declined in 1972 to 8.1 per cent and by 1980 to 4.7 per cent. See, Robinson, Marshall, "Research Support

Although attention to the social sciences in the United Kingdom has always lagged behind the United States, the establishment of the Social Science Research Council in 1965 came only five years after establishment of a separate division for the social sciences within the National Science Foundation. As in the United States, the scientific status of the social sciences had been an object of long-simmering debate before this step was taken. The Clapham Committee on the Social Sciences, set up by the wartime coalition government to consider the need for a social science research council, reported against the idea in 1947. They saw "a danger of premature crystallisation of spurious orthodoxies". It took almost 20 years before this view was rejected by the Heyworth committee in 1965. The Labour government agreed to their recommendation that a social science research council should be established.

The life of the Social Science Research Council falls into two distinct periods, each with its own character: the first decade, from 1965 to 1975, was a period when social scientists, especially economists, had the almost complete confidence of ministers and the civil service. There was an almost unbroken increase in the budget in this period, and scientists were given considerable freedom of action. There was, however, one important exception. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, as secretary of state for education and science from 1970 to 1974, had responsibility for the science budget, and therefore the budget of the Social Science Research Council. According to Andrew Shonfield, who was its chairman for part of this period, she "was no friend of the social sciences . . . The decision which emerged from the new government's review of expenditure on science in 1970–71 implied that the research budget of the Social Science Research Council was not, for the foreseeable future, to be allowed to exceed 2 per cent of the total science vote".[11] In fact the budget of the Social Science Research Council continued to grow during this period, and in the year 1974–75 when a Labour government was returned to power it grew 13.4 per cent in real terms. By the second decade—from 1975 to 1985—the reputation of the social sciences had been severely shaken, budgets were substantially cut, and autonomy of action was greatly reduced.

During this 20-year period there was no formal change in the system but the relationship of the main actors was altered dramatically. The drive for change came from politicians and, in particular, from the views which the government held on the management of the economy and the control

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and Intellectual Advances in the Social Sciences: The Role of the Private Foundations", *SSRC Items*, XXXVII (September 1983) pp. 35–39.

[11] Shonfield, Andrew, "The Social Sciences in the Great Debate on Science Policy", *Minerva*, X (July 1972), p. 429.

of public expenditure. These views were in marked contrast to those held by the leaders of the social scientists.[12]

The setting in which the shifts occurred deserves examination. The period from 1965 to 1975 included three Labour governments and one Conservative government. All of these shared a Keynesian approach to the management of the economy and a commitment to full employment. Furthermore, each government contributed to the substantial increase in spending on the welfare services, the expansion of higher education, and the growth of the National Health Service.

Much of this consensus found its origins in the influence of ideas coming from social scientists in the universities: Keynes at Cambridge, Beveridge at Oxford and the London School of Economics, but also from the long established Fabian influence in British political life. Politicians, civil servants and academics shared a common view of the world, and it was this consensus which provided the context for the creation of the Social Science Research Council.

Very early on in the life of the Social Science Research Council it was clear that, despite its Keynesian and Fabian origins, the academics were in charge of the organisation. The first chairman, although academically qualified, had not followed a conventional academic career, but most of his council and almost all of the committee members were university teachers. Most of the budget was spent on research grants awarded as a result of academic peer review following an application from a university teacher, or on postgraduate training. Very little was spent on programmes specifically relevant to practical policy. The bureaucracy mainly confined its work to administering the award of research grants and studentships. The projects supported represented a wide range of sometimes idiosyncratic views of the world, which in the main came closer to current academic ideas than to what was of interest to Whitehall or Westminster.

However, pressures for relevance emerged and were beginning to be felt in the support of science generally following the publication of the report by Lord Rothschild in 1971.[13] This report introduced the "customer–contractor" principle into government support for research: the "customer" should say what he wants and the "contractor" should provide it. It also proposed shifting a substantial part of research council funds to the most closely related government department, which would then use the funds to contract for research from the research councils.

Although the social sciences were excluded from Lord Rothschild's report, the application of the new principles was soon extended to the social sciences. Andrew Shonfield has given his own account of the reasons why: ". . . once it became clear that . . . the 'producer' department in terms of research—that is the Department of Education and Science—was not willing to safeguard the substantial growth of the country's social science research capacity, it was inevitable that the research council would turn to the 'user' departments [of government]".[14] This is, however, less than convincing since apart from one major contract with the Department of Health and Social Security, the shift towards "relevant" research was supported from the Social Science Research Council's own funds.

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[12] See Smith, Cyril S., "Networks of Influence: The Social Sciences in Britain Since the War", in Bulmer, M. (ed.), *Social Science Research and Government*, *op cit.*, Ch. 5.

[13] "The Organisation and Management of Government R. and D.", *A Framework for Government Research and Development*, Cmnd. 4814 (London: HMSO, 1971).

The first response of the Social Science Research Council to these pressures was to establish the Research Initiatives Board in 1974 to enable the council to decide on the topics most appropriate for support. In its first year, the initiatives of the board accounted for only 5 per cent of the council's budget, but by 1984–85 this figure had reached 50 per cent. Postgraduate studentships which had taken one half of the total budget in 1975–76 fell to one third. The criterion of relevance became visible in yet another important way. The committee structure which had been organised around the disciplines in 1965 was changed in 1982 to a structure which related to areas of interest in practical policy. There has in line with this emphasis on relevance to policy been much greater attention to the dissemination of the results of research to bodies with practical interests in policy.

It may be useful to say how the Social Science Research Council took on its new roles. How were particular topics chosen and how were the problems faced by policy-makers converted into investigatable projects within programmes deemed relevant?

There were three main sources of ideas for research: officers of the Social Science Research Council, members of the committees or council boards, and sources outside the Social Science Research Council. By far the largest number of ideas came from the officers and the next largest number were the result of approaches from other agencies. Very few came from the academic members of the committees. In fact, by and large, the committees—especially when they were based in disciplines—were resistant to the idea of initiating research—the most resistant being the economics committee, but the political science and the anthropology committees were also resistant in the early stages of managed research. The most interest was shown by the committees directing management and industrial relations, education, and sociology and social administration.

The reasons why some committees were more responsive than others to notions of relevance are not simple. The attitude of officers of the Social Science Research Council who served the committees, and who favoured the initiation of projects from the governmental or administrative side, was also a factor. Some committee chairmen were particularly keen to see the council's policy applied successfully. In other cases, "research initiatives" were supported because they offered the possibility of more funding. Interestingly enough, in the early years of "research initiatives", the budget for such initiatives was consistently underspent.

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[14] "The Social Sciences in the Great Debate", *Minerva*, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

It is also an interesting question as to why particular topics thought to bear on policy were chosen rather than others. The great attraction of topics proposed from outside was that they usually offered the possibility of joint support which, in turn, often enhanced the possibility of forming alliances which demonstrated that the Social Science Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council was seen to have value to the world of practical affairs.

On the other hand, those topics internally conceived by the council or its officers tended to be of the type that presumably would appeal to the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, the body that effectively controlled the council's budget. It must be said, however, that the advisory board never gave any guidance, formally or informally, about the topics relevant to policy which would be looked upon with favour. From 1975 to 1985 very few initiatives thought to be relevant to policy in economics were supported, while more than half of all those supported had to do with social policy.

The topics that came from the discipline-based committees were predictably focused on specialised substantive, methodological and theoretical concerns of interest primarily to social scientists working in that discipline. Joint efforts by disciplinary committees were uncommon. It was left to the Research Initiatives Board to bring the disciplines together. Once a topic was thought to be of interest, an exploratory panel of two or more disciplines was set up to examine the problem and report to the board with proposals for a research programme. If the board approved the proposals, an executive panel was formed to commission the research. The appropriate government departments were also represented on these panels.

Although there was a determined attempt by ministers in 1981 to disband the Social Science Research Council, this was not successful. Henceforth ministerial influence had to be exercised through changes of the incumbents of leading positions, such as the chairman, and by the discipline of budgetary cuts. The system, in formal terms, remains unchanged, but the posts and the relationship of the main actors have changed substantially. Political influence is now tangible and visible. Permanent government officials have strengthened their position. The role of the academic participants has much diminished.

Why have Two Different Paths been Followed?

It is clear that the institutions responsible for the financial support of basic social science in the United States and the United Kingdom have responded differently to political pressures to support research considered to be relevant. While the National Science Foundation continues to use arguments about relevance in its budgetary requests to Congress, it was never as deeply or as systematically engaged as the Social Science Research Council in supporting social science research deemed relevant. Why did the latter go for "relevance"—in 1974—and why did it stay committed to it whereas in the former social science went for "convergence" with basic science, except for a brief interlude of RANN? There are five possible explanations for this divergence.

External political pressures: Were political pressures exerted on the SSRC/ESRC to be relevant which were not exerted on the National Science Foundation?

To explore the effect of political pressures on the direction of social science funding it is necessary to note some differences in the political institutions of the two countries. One possible source of confusion lies in the use of such terms as government and administration. In the United States the government is usually called the administration, whereas in the United Kingdom the administration is the civil service, which in some respects stands apart from the government of the day although it is part of the government. Another difference is the fact that the American system has a separation of powers with checks and balances between the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches. Thus the government of the United States has many faces and speaks with many voices about what they think are national needs to which social science might be relevant. The British system is by contrast a unitary one where the party in power chooses the leader who when in office chooses the Cabinet which governs the country. This means that in Great Britain the pressures are usually all in the same direction.

The two systems are often contrasted in terms of the openness of their decision-making processes, and this might bear on the responsiveness of government agencies to the popular will. It might be thought that the influence and power exerted by Congress over the budget of the National Science Foundation would lead it to a more populistic attitude with regard to the support of science. It is worth examining the budgetary process in the two countries to see whether its visibility has any effect on the outcome.

The early stages of the budgetary process are quite similar in the two countries. The Economic and Social Research Council and the National Science Foundation (division of social and economic science) prepare their budgetary requests and the supporting arguments. In the United Kingdom this meant preparing the "forward look", now recast to become the "corporate plan". Since the mid-1970s all research councils have had to justify each budget bid in terms of "national needs" as well as scientific interests. The National Science Foundation, on the other hand, continues to operate principally to accommodate proposals initiated by scientists in the field. This responsiveness tends to yield budgetary bids that emphasise scientific needs, past achievements and future opportunities for research.

A process of negotiation follows in both countries. It involves consideration of the social science claims against the claims for all other sciences and, more pointedly, the claims of science in competition with other claims on total public expenditures given the state of the economy. At this point a significant difference in the national budgetary process occurs. In the United States the bid for the social sciences becomes public knowledge, whereas in the United Kingdom it is not open to public view.

In the United Kingdom, when the Advisory Board for the Research Councils has digested the competing claims of the research councils, it makes a confidential proposal to the minister who in turn has to decide what to bid for science in discussions in the Cabinet on public expenditure. Once a level of spending has been agreed in the Cabinet, this is effectively the final word, although it is not formally ratified by Parliament until much later. The government can rely on its majority to get the Finance Bill through the House of Commons. The Public Expenditure White Paper in November effectively determines the budget for the following year beginning in April, but this White Paper does not indicate how much money will go to the social sciences. The Economic and Social Research Council will, however, be told in confidence how much it is likely to get.

By contrast, the process in the United States has one more stage to run, and this is in the public eye. The administration's budgetary proposal for the National Science Foundation begins a long route through Congress with inspections by authorisation and appropriation committees in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Committee members can see what is proposed not only for the social sciences as a whole but also what is hoped for in each of the programmes such as economics, cognitive science and sociology. Proposals for altering amounts upwards or downwards can thus be aimed at particular areas. This has provided many opportunities for individual members of Congress to voice their own predilections for whatever they deem to be relevant research.

The director of the National Science Foundation and the chairman of the National Science Board make the general justifications for the budgetary request of the foundation in open hearings before each of the committees. Expert witnesses from outside the foundation are heard, and journalists are present. So too are leaders of professional associations and scientific societies. Ultimately after debates, compromises, votes and the presidential signature, a budget is reached and the foundation has money to spend in the new fiscal year which starts in October.

Clearly, the American budgetary system affords greater opportunity for political representation either to damn social science or to encourage it. When social science has been encouraged, it has tended to be because it has been thought to be useful. It is also clear that the kind of campaign organised by social scientists in the United States through the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) against the reductions proposed in the budget of 1981 presented by Mr Stockman, then director of the Bureau of the Budget,[15] stood much more chance of success than a similar lobby would have done in the United Kingdom. However, to see whether particular political interests were more important than political institutions requires some reflection on the political outlook of the administration in the period under examination.

In the United States, from 1960 to 1968, under the Democratic administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, direct support for the social sciences by all departments of the federal government more than doubled in real terms. During the administrations of Presidents Nixon and Ford (from 1969 to 1976), there was a reduction in some departments, a general decline in support for a few years after 1972, but by the end of this Republican period spending for the social sciences in real terms was higher than at the end of the Johnson administration. Against the run of expectations, the Carter administration from 1977 to 1980, while starting at a higher level, decreased the total support for social science every year thereafter. With President Reagan's arrival in 1981, the federal total for social science dropped sharply from $361.7 million to $288.7 million in 1982. Although there were fluctuations in the years that followed, the total in 1986 was little different from 1982 in cash terms, but this represented a reduction in real terms for social science.

Within this larger setting, there was a particular feature of resources for social science at the National Science Foundation. Social science in the foundation did relatively well during the period of the administrations of Presidents Nixon and Ford, when it reached a peak in terms of the share of the social sciences in the total funds for research in the foundation; it was higher then than in any administration before or since. This coincided with the period when social sciences were doing well in government departments, but also with the period when the foundation was still committed to RANN.

There is some danger in thinking of social science in the United States as though it were a homogeneous entity over the period in question. Areas of policy interest changed with the agenda of different administrations, and moreover, when compared with the United Kingdom, certain areas of policy such as those of the Departments of Defense and Agriculture continued to be prominent in support of American social science.

The support for disciplines also changed with the changes in policy—psychology declined from its position in 1962, when it received 47 per cent of federal support for social science, to the low point of a share of 26 per cent in 1976. It recovered its dominant role under President Reagan because of its widespread use in the programme of the Department of Defense. Economics has varied over the 20 years within a band of 17 to

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[15] Dynes, Russell R., "The Institutionalization of COSSA: An Innovative Response to Crises by American Social Science", *Sociological Inquiry*, LIV (Spring 1984), pp. 211–229.

27 per cent of the total. Sociology rose from 5 per cent in 1962 to 28 per cent in 1972 but fell back to 9 per cent in 1986. A final consideration is the important shift in where basic research was actually carried out; 61 per cent of all federally supported basic research in the social sciences was carried out in the universities in 1974, but this did not exceed 41 per cent in the years of the Reagan administration.

A picture similar to that of the United States could be painted for government support in the United Kingdom. The Social Science Research Council was established in 1965, and there was also a rapid expansion of direct departmental support in the 1960s. In 1965 the Ministry of Education was the largest source of funds with the Department of Health some way behind in second place. Law and order was the only other significant area of funding. There was surprisingly little support provided by the Department of Trade and Industry, and the support of macro-economics was left to the Social Science Research Council. By 1968–69, the Department of Health had overtaken the Department of Education and has remained at the top ever since. Social science support continued at high levels in the early years of the next Labour government in 1974, but the crisis in public expenditure in 1976 heralded a downward turn and a shift in emphasis in what kind of research was supported. The arrival of Mrs Thatcher's government in 1979 was a signal for major cuts in direct departmental support, ranging between 30 and 40 per cent, but the situation has now become stable. Law and order has seen steady growth and is now on a par with education, which has remained static since the mid-1970s. Housing, transport and urban studies which all grew very rapidly in the mid-1970s, at one point exceeding expenditure on education, have decreased markedly in the 1980s.

There are no figures which indicate the total support given by the British government to different social science disciplines, but it is clear that the shift in the agenda of policy in the 1980s has carried with it growing support for micro-economics and management studies and a lower ranking for sociology. Psychology improved its position but still did not gain the importance given to it in the United States.

There are, however, figures available which show the support given by the Social Science Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council for the period from 1970 to 1980. Economics, except for one year—1976–77, when it was exceeded by psychology—has always had the largest share of support by the Social Science Research Council for research—usually in the order of 22 or 23 per cent, but as high as 26 per cent in 1973–74 and as low as 17 per cent in 1978–79. Psychology has varied more widely; however, two other research councils also support psychology—at the point where it meets medicine and the natural sciences. Psychology accounted for 25 per cent in 1976–77 but only 9 per cent in 1971–72. The support for sociology has also varied widely—from 19 per cent in 1971–72 to 6 per cent in 1976–77. The "applied fields" of management studies and industrial relations, and of education, usually accounted for another 10 per cent each.[16]

A large part of the funds provided by the Social Science Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council has always gone to the universities which have the basic responsibility for nurturing the scientific and scholarly disciplines. It is particularly noticeable in recent years that government departments are placing more of their research contracts with commercial and market research agencies and are relying less on the universities.

This review of the situation in the United States and the United Kingdom indicates that despite differences in governmental structure, there were some remarkable similarities in the direction of domestic politics and of political regimes since the early 1960s. There were also remarkable similarities in the linkage of social science to political processes. Thus, the initial prosperity of the social sciences in the universities and the government in the 1960s went hand in hand with Democratic administrations in the United States and a Labour government in the United Kingdom. It is also the case that in the 1970s it was under the Conservative government of Edward Heath and the Republican administration of Mr Nixon that the idea of relevance came to its fullest fruition on the agendas for the support of research of the National Science Foundation and the Social Science Research Council, just as it was the case that in the 1980s that under the conservative regimes of Mrs Thatcher and Mr Reagan hostility was directed toward the social sciences and was manifest in reductions in their budgets. Nonetheless, during the Reagan administration, basic research in social science was reinforced at the National Science Foundation while this has not been the case for the Economic and Social Research Council under Mrs Thatcher's government.

Given this range of contrasts and similarities, the explanation of why the criterion of political relevance went deeper and lasted longer in the United Kingdom than in the United States is not provided by the adduction of political factors.

Priorities and commitments: If not through external political pressures, could the difference in the adherence to the criterion of relevance be traced to differences in how the leadership of the social science professions in the two countries responded to political as against scientific criteria?

Those who controlled the affairs of the Social Science Research Council in the United Kingdom have tended to be more active and more directly linked to the current political outlooks than those who managed the social sciences at the National Science Foundation. The chairman and the members of the council of the Social Science Research Council were appointed directly by the minister, whereas the senior social scientists at the National Science Foundation were career appointments or secondments of professional social scientists on leave from universities. True, the foundation is not completely free of political influence in that its budgetary proposals are products of the reigning administration. However, there is considerable insulation by law from direct participation by civil servants in partisan politics, and even the term and the terms of appointment for the director of the National Science Foundation and the National Science Board are a bulwark against the monopoly by any political party.

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[16] These figures refer to support through the research grant scheme and do not include research initiatives. The latter, often multidisciplinary, tended to emphasise "applied" fields and disciplines such as sociology. The most useful source for this information is Lisle, E., Machin, H. and Yasin, S., *Traversing the Crisis*, *op. cit.*

In the United Kingdom over the first 20 years, the appointments to the council of the Social Science Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council became more overtly political in a party sense, particularly with the increase in the number of non-academic members, who by the end of the 1970s formed a majority of the membership. But even in the early years the academics selected as members of council tended to share in the broad consensus of Keynesian and Fabian opinion. Council in turn selected the members of the expert disciplinary committees which carried out the peer review and, although this contained a range of opinion, the majority of the committee of the members were of the dominant current of political opinion.

The most senior official of council, the secretary, was selected by a council committee with representation from the parent department, and whereas in the first decade the appointments tended to be career civil servants, the second decade was headed by a social scientist who agreed with the broad consensus of interventionist policies. This forged a strong link to government prescriptions of relevance and no doubt reinforced the contrast in social science between British involvement and American autonomy.

In the United States, a report to the House Committee on Science and Technology[17] refers to the long period of detachment of social scientists from the federal government in the United States, which contrasts markedly with the traditions of close association between the academic world and government in the United Kingdom. During this period, which lasted until the 1950s, "important parts of the social sciences turned inward" and detached themselves from the main political currents "in an effort to achieve scientific respectability".[18] This period led to major growth of the theoretical and methodological bases of the discipline which has given these disciplines a comparative edge internationally. Although this separation yielded in some degree to the pressures for relevance and political participation, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, the political attitudes of American social scientists remain strongly affected by their conceptions of social science as science, which require autonomy for their achievements.

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[17] Knezo, Genevieve J., *Research Policies for the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1986).

[18] *Ibid.*

On the operating level, the leading officials of the foundation maintained a greater distance from party politics than their opposite numbers in the United Kingdom, despite the fact that these officials were more likely to appear before congressional committees than their British counterparts were to appear before the House of Commons committees to explain their actions and plead their cause. Physical scientists or engineers were the primary spokesman for the National Science Foundation, even on matters of social science. This, too, favoured a great independence from political concerns. Furthermore, given the tradition of the foundation to emphasise basic research, American social scientists who wanted to work on current issues of policy would be more likely to submit proposals to agencies with particular tasks in other government departments rather than to the National Science Foundation. In any event, given the size of the United States and the importance of regional variations, there has been no single intellectual establishment dominating the social sciences as has occurred in the United Kingdom.

Strategies in the competition for resources: To what extent was the British commitment to the criterion of relevance maintained because it was thought to be the most effective strategy in competing for resources?

The judgements of those who controlled the SSRC/ESRC and the division of social sciences in the National Science Foundation clearly differed with respect to what strategy was most likely to enhance or maintain a share of the funds available for science. The former chose relevance and the latter chose convergence. Neither strategy brought sustained success. Both strategies brought social science into relations with the other sciences that need to be analysed for their possible bearing on the question before us.

Social science moved with the rising tide of science at the National Science Foundation, and generally benefited as that tide rose in favour of basic research. In the United Kingdom the tide of science was flowing more in the direction of applied research. There were pressures on all five research councils in the British system to make their contribution to the solution of the country's economic problems and it would have been difficult for the SSRC/ESRC to strike out for itself.

Whatever the directions of the tide, it is usually difficult to make out a persuasive case for basic research in the political arena. Applied research seems to promise more tangible results which will be achieved in the short term. It gives the impression that the pace of scientific progress can be controlled more closely. In addition, since the social sciences use so little equipment compared with the physical sciences, it is difficult to plead the case for greater expenditure on the grounds of the need for the latest research apparatus which might open up subjects and problems for scientific investigation. Hence the "relevance" of the work of social scientists must make do to justify claims for financial support.

Given that the support of the social sciences as science is largely carried out within a framework of decisions about science as a whole, it is particularly important to know what other scientists think about the social sciences. In both countries natural scientists who control the supporting agencies have very little interest in—or knowledge of—the social sciences, and very little curiosity about their possible application to the solution of economic and social problems.

The main concern of such scientists is what happens to their own disciplines, e.g., physics, chemistry and biology, when governments wish science to be relevant to national needs.[19] The relevance of social science might matter to natural scientists if it had something useful to say about science policy or about the successful application of technology. Furthermore, natural scientists generally are less exercised about matters of relevance. They assume, when the government insists on the criterion of relevance, that their own work is bound to be useful; that such insistence might also have implications for the social sciences gets secondary, if any, consideration.

The relatively low budgets for the social sciences are a factor in sustaining the distance between the social and natural sciences. Generally, the natural sciences would gain relatively little by acquiring for themselves the allocation for the social sciences. Sometimes when the political attack on social science is severe, the scientific community shows remarkable solidarity. This, in some degree, is a result of the fact that all scientists have a common home in the universities, and regard an attack on any science is a hostile action against that home and the freedom of scientific inquiry.

Institutional differentiation: To what degree can the explanation for the differences in the insistence on the criterion of relevance be traced to the fact that the support of basic research and the support of applied research are more often combined in the same institutions in the United Kingdom than is the case in the United States?

The links between government departments and the institutions which support scientific research are very different in the United States and the United Kingdom. There are of course certain similarities. In both countries, it is recognised that agencies which support scientific research should contribute to the training of the new generation of research workers and teachers of scientific subjects. Thus, for example, the Social Science Research Council was until 1979 spending over half its budget on support for postgraduate training. The National Science Foundation has also been active in providing fellowships. In addition, in virtually every grant the foundation makes there is money for support of graduate research assistants and substantial support for the direct pursuit of doctoral dissertations. The National Science Foundation and the SSRC/ESRC both supported fundamental research on theoretical and methodological issues which led to improvement of government statistics and of information data bases.

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[19] This was particularly evident in the United Kingdom in 1971 when Lord Rothschild produced his report on government support for the natural sciences. For the United States it was evident from the reaction to the evaluation of RANN in Simon, Herbert A., *et al.*, *Social and Behavioral Science Programs in the National Science Foundation* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1976), pp. 62–82.

Where the National Science Foundation and the SSRC/ESRC diverge is in their roles with regard to research relevant to policy. Until 1968, the National Science Foundation was specifically instructed to restrict its support to basic research, and to this day 95 per cent of its expenditure on research is for basic research. The SSRC/ESRC has never had such a limitation on its activities, and indeed one of the arguments for its establishment was a clear expectation of usefulness. Its character, as interpreted in the corporate plan, refers to the need to stimulate and support research that leads to better understanding of economic and social conditions, and to improve the awareness and use of that research among persons who influence opinion and make decisions in the wider public. Significantly the "applied" fields of the social sciences—management studies, industrial relations, planning, education and social policy—are not represented in the National Science Foundation, but they are a significant element in the Economic and Social Research Council.

There are other institutions in Washington, particularly the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, which offer, on invitation, summary evaluations of the present state of scientific knowledge, and recommendations about matters of interest to administrators and legislators; this activity covers the social as well as the natural sciences.[20] The National Science Foundation has a small division of policy research and analysis, but the work of this division is currently reduced, and in any case its services are to the internal administration of the foundation, with occasional reports to other agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget.

In neither country does the agency supporting social science operate within a clearly demarcated structure which attempts to keep separate the support of basic research from that of applied research. However, the lines have become more blurred in the British system.

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[20] See Adams, R. M., Smelser, N. J. and Trieman, D. J. (eds), *Behavioral and Social Science Research: A National Resource* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1982); Smelser, N. J. and Gerstein, D. R. (eds), *Behavioral and Social Science: Fifty Years of Discovery* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1986); and Gerstein, D. R. *et al.*, (eds), *The Behavioral and Social Sciences: Achievements and Opportunities*, (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1988).

Multiple avenues of support and the performance of applied research: A final possible explanation for the differences may lie in the fact that in the United Kingdom there is relatively little support for applied social science research by government departments. This may have created a vacuum into which the Social Science Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council have been unavoidably drawn. American federal agencies and departments commission applied research on a much larger scale and have been doing so for much longer.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the bulk of social science research is conducted with funds provided by bodies other than the National Science Foundation or the Economic and Social Research Council. In the United States, vast sums are allocated by "mission agencies" in health, education, urban affairs, justice, etc. Although these are also important in the United Kingdom, they are on a much smaller scale. The social sciences, with the exception of economics, have seldom been regarded as important for their policies by British government departments. Certain other American departments like defence and agriculture, have spent much money on social research, while their counterparts in the United Kingdom have spent very little. Accordingly, in the United Kingdom, the role of the SSRC/ESRC in the support of social science was much more prominent than that of the foundation in the United States. When the council entered upon a programme of applied research, more often than not there was little or no work already being done on that topic; it was entering virgin territory and was not duplicating work being done by government departments.

One other feature of the political institutions in the two countries needs examination: the role of the civil service. Some of the problems facing modern societies are not readily resolved by political contention, or within the short time-span of swings in the political pendulum. A special responsibility therefore falls on the permanent officials who not only help shape government policies but also administer them. Civil servants often find it useful to have the kind of information and analyses which social scientists can provide. They need statistics to assess governmental programmes and they require explanations for the failures and successes of government policies. They may need to deal with issues which require a long-term perspective, such as investment in nuclear power or the ageing of the population.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom have a non-partisan tradition for the civil service—much older in the latter than in the former—but in most agencies of the United States government there is also a layer of senior officials subject to frequent turnover. A change from one administration to another means changes in staff deep in most federal departments as far down as the level of deputy assistant secretary. Some of these may be social scientists brought in from the universities or elsewhere. Since these officials help formulate the policies of the government, they are crucial in what use is made of research and research findings. Here there is a tendency for such political appointees to rely upon independent research institutions called "think tanks", which hold their own political views.

In Britain, high civil servants enjoy security of tenure as do all the ranks recruited through competitive examination. The civil service is run by generalists with specialists—some of whom are social scientists, but of these only the economists have any real influence—in a subsidiary role. In the United States, specialists have a much more important role. Since the late 1960s there has been in the United Kingdom an increasing number of political advisers brought in by governments; naturally these share the political views of the incumbent government. There has also been an increase in the number of specialists brought in on short-term appointments. These short-term specialists are not recruited in accordance with political criteria. The Cabinet Office Central Policy Review Staff in the 1970s is an example of this practice. Particularly notable is the reduced influence of civil servants managing research divisions in the policy of commissioning research. In the last three Conservative governments, ministers in spending departments have become much more directly involved in such decisions.

As we have seen, the National Science Foundation has much less to do with the departments of government than do the SSRC/ESRC. However, British civil servants have rarely taken the initiative in making use of the resources of the Social Science Research Council or the Economic and Social Research Council. They have left the research council to make the running and have tended to encourage it to deal with the long-term policy issues which may be crowded out by the politician's concern with short term political advantage.

It is also important to consider the comparative strength of the agencies which contract to do applied work. In the United States commercial social research has become highly developed in carrying out policy research, and a significant proportion of government contracts for social research are given to commercial research enterprises. In the United Kingdom the universities have been the centres for both applied and basic research, and this has only begun to change in recent years. Commercial firms in the United Kingdom still work mainly in survey research rather than in the policy research.

Concluding Observations

We have sought to explain why two bodies critical to the support of social science in the United States and United Kingdom, each with a strong component of social scientists in their management, have differed so much in their use of the criterion of relevance in the support of research.

The conclusions at which we have arrived are, first, that the social scientists in charge of each body have differed in their commitments to political and scientific criteria, second, that the whole system of support for social science in each country has varied in the clarity with which it has separated the support of basic social research from the support of applied social research; and third, that the weakness of applied research in government departments in the United Kingdom drew the Social Science Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council to lay greater emphasis on research relevant to policy.

The other hypotheses we have considered are more problematic. In the case of political demands for relevance, recent political history in both countries is so similar it is difficult to identify this as a reason for the different commitment to the criterion of relevance. In the case of strategies designed to increase the share of resources for social research, the evidence is ambiguous. It is also clear that the National Science Foundation emerged in a stronger position in 1985 than the Economic and Social Research Council. (There has been some improvement in the financial situation of the Economic and Social Research Council since 1985 as part of a general boost for science.) However since each body is continuing along its own path, each must be convinced either that it has been successful or that the cost of such a strategy is supportable. It is interesting to reflect on what might cause a change of direction. One factor might be that each organisation will learn from the experience of the other.